

# The Great Grumbler and the Wonder Tree

by Margaret Mahy  
pictures by Diane Perham

## Overview

In this humorous, imaginative narrative, a witch helps Mrs Finch solve the problem of her husband's grumbling. This text is quite long, so it may be best to use a mixture of shared and guided reading approaches on the first reading so that the children are able to hook into the storyline. It's a rich text that can be revisited many times, so a deeper focus on specific aspects could well be left to a second reading.

## Suggested purposes

This text provides excellent opportunities for exploring language and poetic text features. It supports the comprehension strategies of forming hypotheses, identifying the author's purpose, analysing and synthesising, and evaluating. This is a great text for readers' theatre and also for independent rereading, providing useful mileage for fluent readers.

## Text features

(Note that some features have been listed more than once under different subheadings. Focus on only one or two features per session.)

- the message about Mr Finch's behaviour
- the fantasy elements
- the clear narrative structure of problem, climax, and resolution
- the use of paragraphs
- the build-up in pace and the sense of anticipation created as the food piles up in front of Mr Finch
- the characterisation (through direct description, dialogue, illustrations, and speech bubbles)
- the poetic features (the rhyming dialogue, the poetic syntax of the rhymes, the use of alliteration, the repeated sentence structures on page 5, the structure of the final sentence, and the rich language)
- the rich, descriptive language:
- the expressive dialogue, including the use of exclamations
- the humour and detail in the illustrations
- the use of irony on pages 5 and 6
- the complex sentences on pages 6, 7, and 10
- the sentences starting with adverbs ("However", "Otherwise", "Whenever") and the adverbial phrase "Mind you" on page 3
- the use of commas to support phrasing
- the different forms of the word "grumble"
- the adjectives "gold", "great", "leafy", "ordinary", "rustling", "silver", "tiny"
- the adverbs "beautifully", "carefully", "crossly", "hardly", "quickly", "sternly"

- the alternatives to “said” – “cried”, “grumbled”, “replied”, “screamed”, “sighed”
- “grumbled”, “grumbler”, “grumbler’s”, “grumbling”.

### Possible challenges

- the fantasy elements
- the complex sentence structures
- the meanings of some of the interest words.

### Introducing the text

Be aware that the inclusion of magic and a witch in this book means it may not be considered appropriate for all children.

Tell the children you have a book for them to read that’s by Margaret Mahy. Briefly recall some other Margaret Mahy texts and talk about some of the features they might expect to find in her writing, such as rhyme, alliteration, lively language, humour, unexpected happenings, and maybe magic! Have the children read the title and examine the illustration of the wonder tree on the front cover. *What kind of story is this going to be? What does it mean to “grumble”? What do you think might happen?*

### During the reading

If the children have not seen this text before as a shared reader, it may be better to use a mixture of shared and guided reading approaches on the first reading so that the children are able to focus on the storyline.

Read the names of the author and the illustrator. Ask the children to read the text silently, pausing at various points for discussion or to clarify any difficulties.

Pages 2 and 3 – You may need to reassure the children about the idiomatic phrase “Mind you”. Draw their attention to the comma and model how the witch might have said it. If the children don’t know what a turnip is, show them the illustration on page 4. If necessary, support them in the decoding of “trailer-load” and check they understand what this means. *What is Mrs Finch’s problem? What do these pages tell you about the characters of Mr and Mrs Finch?* Note whether the children notice the clues in the speech bubbles.

Page 5 – Check that the children realise that two months have now passed. Encourage the children to visualise what the tree looks like. Ask them to describe it to you. They could refer to the cover illustration for confirmation.

Page 6 – You may need to model the phrasing in the third paragraph. Explain that the commas before and after the word “grumbling” help the reader know how to read the sentence. *Does this fit with what you already know about Mr Finch?*

Page 7 – Check that the children understand the meaning of “droop”.

Page 8 – *Why was Mr Finch upset? What does this tell you about him? What do you think will happen?*

Pages 10 and 11 – Note the change in pace. *Is this what you thought would happen?*

Page 12 – You may need to explain what leaf mould is. *What might Mr Finch be thinking while he does the dishes? Why do you think Margaret Mahy wrote this story?*

If you’ve had to provide a lot of support with this first reading, plan to run another session on this text, with the children taking greater responsibility for the reading.

## After the reading

(Choose only one or two per session.)

Listen to the children reread the text with a partner, noting how they manage the challenges of the rich vocabulary and relatively complex language structures and their use of expression, especially for the dialogue.

Introduce the term “fantasy” and identify the fantasy elements of the story (the witch, the personification of the tree and the food, and the use of magic). Compare this to another of Mahy’s fantasy tales, such as *The Witch in the Cherry Tree*.

Talk about the writer’s use of personification. Note the clue on page 5 where the rhyme on the seed is written in the first person. *How does Margaret Mahy describe the tree’s voice (page 7)? On page 10, what words first tell you that the food is alive?*

Focus on the structure of the text, looking at the way the writer builds excitement. Identify the initial problem, the climax, and the resolution. Talk about how the story increases in pace, starting with describing the problem that has been going on for a long time, then moving on two months while the tree grows, and then having a lot happen in the space of one mealtime. Reread pages 10 and 11 out loud together, encouraging the use of expression and pace!

Draw attention to the author’s use of paragraphs. Explain how each paragraph has a main idea. Ask the children to reread a page that has more than one paragraph and to summarise the main ideas.

Talk about the poetic features of the text. Explain to the children that the writer has chosen words carefully to make the text sound satisfying to read aloud and to give it a magical feel. Have the children read the rhyming text with a partner. Remind the children that magical tales often include special rhymes. Reread the second paragraph on page 5. Draw out the idea that Margaret Mahy has used repetition here to emphasise the idea of Mrs Finch taking very good care of the seed.

Talk about how the writer has used a variety of adjectives and adverbs to add detail and create a vivid picture. Find some examples of the use of two adjectives together, such as “tiny, gold letters” and “little silver tap” (page 5) or “rustling, leafy voice” (page 7). *How would these sentences sound if the writer hadn’t used adjectives?*

Focus on the adverbs on page 10. Remind the children that the adverbs are telling the reader *how* the food was talking. You could link this to their experience of reading plays, which often include adverbs in the stage directions to tell the characters how to speak. Draw their attention to paragraph three on page 8. *How was the silver beet cooked?* Record the adverbs in the text on a chart (that can be referred to later) and have the children role-play their meanings.

Identify the alternatives to “said” in the text. Check that the children are clear about their meanings. Talk about how the alternatives sound more interesting and give the reader a better idea of exactly how the characters are speaking.

Explore how the words and the illustrations work together to show what the characters were like. *How would you describe the characters? Do you agree with what Mrs Finch did?*

With more sophisticated thinkers, you could focus on the examples of irony. Reread the last paragraph on page 5 and draw out the idea that most of the paragraph is describing a most extraordinary tree and that the writer is sharing a joke by using the word “ordinary” in the last sentence. Explain that this is called “irony”. See if the children can find the example of irony in the last paragraph on page 6. *Do you think Mr Finch realises he is being ironic?*

Record the different verb forms “grumble”, “grumbled”, and “grumbling” on the whiteboard. Talk about the need to delete the final “e” before adding “ing” and about being able to just add “d” rather than “ed”. Practise creating verb forms for other words that end in “le”, such as “settle”, “wobble”, or “rattle”. You could also talk about how adding “r” changes the verb to a noun, for example, someone who “grumbles” is a “grumbler”. Have fun thinking of other examples.

### Suggestions for further tasks

Read other fantasy stories by Margaret Mahy (and others). Encourage the children to try fantasy stories as part of their personal reading.

Create thought bubbles for what Mrs Finch might be thinking on pages 6, 7, 9, or 12.

Have the children work in pairs to create a list of adjectives that describe Mr and Mrs Finch.

Use the text for readers’ theatre or as a play for puppets. Remind the children to use the alternatives to “said” and their associated adverbs as clues for how to read the dialogue.

During shared writing, practise using text features for a particular purpose, for example, using alliteration or repeating a sentence structure for effect or using two adjectives together or adverbs to make the writing more vivid.